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Partant de la réflexion que la « mort de l'auteur » n'a pas grand sens dans le cas de Byron et du byronisme, cet article soutient que le nom de l'auteur peut être considéré comme un cas particulier de ce qu'Edgar Morin appelle le « néo-mythe », où « le concret vécu, s'infiltrant dans l'idée abstraite ou générale, la rend *vivante* ». À la différence de certains autres poètes romantiques, Byron ne rumine pas son ego, mais crée et améliore constamment un personnage littéraire biographique qu'il projette dans le monde comme une image de lui-même qu'il lègue à la postérité. Cette fusion de la vie dans la littérature n'est pas la construction d'un sujet transcendantal, mais bien plutôt une sublimation du moi, préfigurant le dogme de l'impersonnalité littéraire de T. S. Eliot. En fait, il existe au moins trois Byron : le romantique, le satiriste néo-augustéen, et le poète antiromantique. S'inscrivant en faux contre le portrait que Bertrand Russell a brossé du poète, cet article montre que Byron se caractérise par un effort constamment renouvelé pour inventer et réinventer son personnage littéraire, établissant un modèle libertaire d'ironie romantique qui lui survit encore aujourd'hui.

Starting from the reflection that the "death of the author" makes hardly any sense in the case of Byron and Byronism, this article argues that the name of the author can be viewed as a particular case of what Edgar Morin calls the "neo-myth", in which the lived experience makes the abstract idea come alive. Indeed, unlike some other romantic writers, Byron does not ruminate his ego, but creates, and constantly ameliorates, a literary-cum-biographical character that he projects into the world as the image of himself that he conceives of as his legacy to posterity. This merging of life into literature is not the construction of a transcendental self, but much rather a sublimation of the self, foreshadowing T. S. Eliot's dogma of literary impersonality. Indeed, there is not one Byron, but at least three: the romantic, the neo-Augustan satirist, and the anti-romantic poet. Challenging Bertrand Russell's portrait of the poet, this article shows that Byron has been characteristically involved in the constantly reiterated effort to invent and remake his literary character, setting a libertarian model of romantic irony that survived him to this day.

Byron, byronisme, Edgar Morin, Bertrand Russel, mort de l'auteur, romantisme

This contribution would like to start from Michel Foucault's remarks on "the name of the author" and the "author function " in his lecture "Théorie de la literature: Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?" revisited, together with Roland Barthes's "The Death of the author'", by Antoine Compagnon in his lecture "Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur". We would argue that the name of the author can be viewed as a particular case of what Edgar Morin calls the "neo-myth":

> Le néo-mythe ne réintroduit nullement l'explication par le vivant, le singulier, le concret là où règne l'explication par le physique, le général, l'abstrait. Mais c'est le concret vécu qui, s'infiltrant dans l'idée abstraite ou générale, la rend *vivante*. Il ne réintroduit pas les dieux et les esprits. Il spiritualise et divinise l'idée de l'intérieur. Il ne retire pas nécessairement le sens rationnel de l'idée parasitée. Il lui inocule une surcharge de sens, qui la transfigure (Morin 1986: 168).

"Byronism" is a case in point, in so far as it defines a way of being-in-the-world—more exactly than a way of life—a mythic model, produced by Byron's life story, as much as it is an implicit projection having its origin in Byron's poetic work. It was first a modern myth, constructed and enacted by Byron as the project of becoming "the great Napoleon of the realm of rhyme". But it also served as the active principle of Byron's after-life, or symbolic survival, by becoming a living paradigm, an evolving role impersonated by writers, artists, and men in all walks of life, for more than a century after his death. This paper would attempt to adumbrate a portrait in miniature of this living idea.

Lord Byron cuts a singular figure in English literature, in so far as his fame is grounded less on his poetic work itself as on his life story, or rather, more exactly, because it is all one. From *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* to *Don Juan*, all his poems are autobiographical — and none of them really is: Byron is *fils de ses oeuvres*. Unlike Wordsworth (whom he did his best *not* to emulate), and unlike Rousseau (but in many ways it amounts to the same), Byron does not ruminate his ego, but creates, and constantly ameliorates, a literary-cum-biographical character that he projects into the world as the image of himself that he conceives of as his legacy to posterity. Stendhal, one of his greatest admirers, and his spiritual heir in many ways, wrote that "Lord Byron knew how to paint only one man: himself," (Stendhal 1829: 274): that is true, but potentially misleading, for Byron exists only in the "painting" that his life and works converge exclusively to construct. Long before Wolfgang Iser, Hans Robert Jauss, and reception theorists coined the concept, the *implied author* is Byron's essential horizon: all his efforts concur to conjuring up this myth of the Byronic hero as author, and as author of himself. The myth is an avatar of literary immortality, which survives the historical George Gordon, Lord Byron, and is reincarnated under various forms in the subsequent generations, all the more efficiently when that happens unawares. A left-wing intellectual, obviously belonging to a rare intellectual élite or *aristocratie de l'esprit*, frowning with a sombre air on 21st century TV screens, with long curly black hair, in a black jacket and white shirt with a wide-open collar, speaking up in commitment for a just cause in favour of the people of some exotic country: what's the name again? It is true that, in this respect, Voltaire, and Rousseau were precursors, but on the other side of the Revolution, achieving overnight fame with the first cantos of *Childe Harold* in 1812, and international celebrity by conquering the detestation of his class before leaving England for good in 1816, the year after Waterloo, Byron brought the figure of the radical intellectual to an incandescent absolute. Some twenty years later, in 1838, Flaubert wrote : "Vraiment je n'estime profondément que deux hommes, Rabelais et Byron, les deux seuls qui aient écrit dans l'intention de nuire au genre humain et de lui rire à la face. Quelle immense position que celle d'un homme ainsi placé devant le monde !" (To Ernest Chevalier, Sept. 13, 1838: 16). The Byronic hero is defined by Macaulay as follows:

> It is hardly too much to say, that Lord Byron could exhibit only one man and only one woman, a man, proud, moody, cynical, with defiance on his brow, and misery in his heart, a scorner of his kind, implacable in revenge, yet capable of deep and strong affection: a woman all softness and gentleness, loving to caress and to be caressed, but capable of being transformed by passion into a tigress (Macaulay 1967: 636).

The Byronic rebel is a man with disappointed romantic ideals, who has given up all hopes of finding happiness in this world, but stands up against fate in a desperate aesthetic gesture of intellectual and physical courage, flying the *mal du siècle* in a persistent search for sensation to escape boredom: "The great object of life is sensation—to feel that we exist, even though in pain. It is this 'craving void' which drives us to gaming—to battle—to travel—to intemperate but keenly felt pursuits of any description" (To Arabella Milbanke, 6 Sept. 1813, 1982: 66). The Byronic hero is definitely not an idealist: he is the figure of the dark romantic, deeply disillusioned — and in this respect, for instance, Philip Larkin, especially perhaps in *The Less Deceived*, is indebted to Byron in a hardly ever acknowledged way. The episodes of Byron's life, chief among those his outrageous behaviour to his wife Arabella Milbanke, and his incestuous relation to his half-sister Augusta, are chapters in a story that seem to have been devised so as to obtain the greatest sensational effect in the gazettes. With Byron, life and literature are one: it is interesting to note that the name of his daughter with Augusta, Medora, is also that of Conrad's mistress in *The Corsair*, and it is certainly not purely by accident that the name of his other daughter, with Arabella, is echoed by the title of Nabokov's novel: *Ada, or Ardour*.

Byronism may be defined as this merging of life into literature, which is not properly speaking the construction of a self as literary character, as an escape from the boredom of the self into myth: not the construction of the transcendental self, but much rather a sublimation of the self. Byronism really foreshadows T. S. Eliot's modernist dogma of literary impersonality, as Byron is constantly ahead of himself, always dropping one mask for another, disavowing his previous figures as so many personae: the prototype of the pop star à la David Bowie. The portrait of the Byronic hero is Protean, characteristically restless, constantly fighting against despair, questioning everything, including his own faith in poetry — "Poeshie", whence comes Rimbaud's assertion that "*la littérature, c'est de la m…"* :

> I have been reading Grimm's *Correspondence*. He repeats frequently, in speaking of a poet, or a man of genius in any department, even in music, (Gretry, for instance,) that he must have *une âme qui se tourmente, un esprit violent*. How far this may be true, I know not; but if it were, I should be a poet '*per excellenza*' for I have always had *une âme*, which not only tormented itself but every body else in contact with it; and an *esprit violent*, which has almost left me without any *esprit* at all. As to defining what a poet *should* be, it is not worth while, for what are *they* worth? what have they done? (31 January 1821, 1839: 485)

There is not one Byron, monolithic, but at least three—(1) the romantic poet of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*; (2) the neo-Augustan satirist of *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* and *The Vision of Judgment*; (3) the later, anti-romantic poet of *Don Juan*. These remarks would tend to suggest a hypothesis that would call for a rereading of Byron, and reconsidering his importance in the history of literature, by analysing the essential paradox that lies at the core of Byronism as anti-romantic romanticism. Arguably, Byron's romanticism is a strategic stance, by which he catered to the fashion of his age to achieve literary fame, when he decided to become "The great Napoleon of the realm of rhyme" (*Don Juan* XI.lv), but his poetic discourse is philosophically anti-romantic, in so far as he is anything but an idealist, either in the Platonic sense (like Shelley) or in the Kantian sense (like Wordsworth and Coleridge): Byron is really the heir of the liberal philosophers of the British Enlightenment, and the precursor of the Modernists. Byron's acknowledged Poetic Father is Pope, not Blake:

> Thou shalt believe in Milton, Dryden, Pope;
> Thou shalt not set up Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey;
> Because the first is crazed beyond all hope,
> The second drunk, the third so quaint and mouthy (*Don Juan* I. ccv)

Byronism as a phenomenon in the sociology of literature can be understood in a narrower, and in a larger sense. In the narrower sense, it is a Byron-mania that spread in Europe after the fall of Napoleon I, and perhaps most conspicuously in France at the time of the *Restauration* and until the Second Empire, that has been thoroughly studied by Edmond Estève in *Byron et le romantisme français*. Chateaubriand, in his *Essai sur la littérature anglaise*, argues that his *René* preceded and influenced Byron's *Harold*: "J'ai précédé Lord Byron dans la vie, il m'a précédé dans la mort" (Chateaubriand 1836 : 307), etc. — Lamartine composed in French *Le Dernier chant du pèlerinage d'Harold*. The influence of Byron on Musset, Vigny and Hugo has been underlined by Joseph Texte:

> Le plus grand des poètes anglais — et le plus grand de tous les lyriques, — ç'a été, aux yeux des romantiques, lord Byron,
> Lui, dont l'Europe, encore toute armée,
> Écoutait en tremblant les sauvages concerts;
> Lui qui, depuis dix ans, fuyait sa renommée,
> Et de sa solitude emplissait l'univers;
> Lui, le grand inspiré de la Mélancolie… (Julleville 1899: 725)[1]

[1] Joseph Texte does not give any bibliographical reference for this citation, no doubt too well-known by his readers at the time, from a letter by Musset to Lamartine (*Poésies nouvelles de Alfred de Musset* (Musset 1852: 80). It may be instructive to quote this footnote of Texte's: "A. de Vigny, *Sur la mort de Byron*, pièce publiée dans la Muse française (1824) et réimprimée par E. Asse dans *A. de Vigny et les éditions originales de ses poésies* (p. 58). — Sur Byron en France, voir Chateaubriand, *Essai sur la litt. angl.* Et le volume de M. de Marcellus (*Chateaubriand et son temps*) et *Corresp. inédite* (histoire curieuse des rapports de Stendhal avec Byron); V. Hugo, *Lord Byron et ses rapports avec la litt. actuelle* (article de la *Muse française*, réimprimé dans *Litt. et philos. mêlées*); A. de Vigny, *Journal d'un poète* et *Conservateur littéraire*, 1820; Lamartine, *l'Homme*,

Catulle Mendès saw in Byron "l'inventeur de la mélancolie moderne" (Mendès 1902: 46), and valued his influence on French literature above that of Shakespeare.

> Lord Byron ne laisse pas, en dépit de son énorme abondance désordonnée, d'avoir quelque ressemblance avec un Brummel qui serait un grand poète; Pétrone extraordinairement lyrique et ironique d'un cant presque néronien par la férocité, il fut comme l'arbitre des désolations distinguées et des martyres dédaigneux; et son influence qui, selon quelque équité, aurait pu être moindre, — car il y a de l'exagération à voir, comme l'a fait Goethe, dans Euphorion, qui est Lord Byron lui-même, le suprême enfantement de Faust et d'Hélène, c'est-à-dire de la Pensée et de la Forme, — son influence chez nous fut très puissante, sinon durable. Il semble que nous lui ayons surtout attribué une urgence de mode. N'importe encore qu'elle se ravalât d'une petite imitation d'attitude et d'habits, — Werther aussi nous avait conquis par la pèlerine de la redingote étroite à la taille; elle ne laissa pas d'être considérable, et, il faut le dire, beaucoup plus générale, dans l'extériorité, il est vrai, que celle de Shakespeare lui-même. (Mendès 1902: 48).

But the first Byronism appears to be part of a certain anglophilia, and the interest of the France of the *Restauration* in an aristocrat poet, whose fame would soon wane under the effect of the anti-Christian spirit of *Cain* and *Manfred*, the radical and irreligious libertarianism of *A Vision of Judgment*, and the amoral satire of *Don Juan*. Echoing Southey's denunciation of "the Satanic school" of poetry (Southey 1821: xxi), Chateaubriand would say : "Lord Byron a laissé une déplorable école: je présume qu'il serait aussi désolé des Childe-Harold auxquels il a donné naissance, que je le suis des René qui rêvassent autour de moi" (Chateaubriand 1836: 358). The first Byronism rests essentially on the romantic mawkishness and exoticism of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, and rapidly dies off when Byron swerves away from his first manner. But it is much more interesting to trace Byron's poetic inheritance in late-nineteenth century post-romantic, pre-modernist poets: in Rimbaud's "dérèglement de tous les sens", Baudelaire's aesthetic sensationalism, Swinburne's radicalism, and more generally the Bohemian opposition to both bourgeois triviality and aristocratic smugness, which is precisely what Matthew Arnold singled out as Byron's main literary virtue, or more precisely his most beautiful failure:

> His own aristocratic class, whose cynical make-believe drove him to fury; the great middle-class, on whose impregnable Philistinism he shattered himself to pieces, — how little have either of these felt Byron's vital influence! (Arnold 1881: xxx).

It may be an indication that Byronism deserves some reconsideration in literary studies, that Bertrand Russell devotes a whole chapter to Byron in his *History of Western Philosophy*. Writing in 1946, Russell's agenda is to demonstrate that there is a direct ideological filiation between Romanticism and Hitlerism, and because he writes with this ulterior motive he is not always convincing. Thus, Russell considers that Byron was socially, almost atavistically determined, to become famous, as the offspring of a dark aristocratic lineage, and because he received a Calvinist education. Well, he could have remained a loser, like his father. Russell writes:

> Wickedness, [Byron] told himself, was a hereditary curse in his blood, and evil fate to which he was predestined by the Almighty. If that were indeed the case, since he *must* be remarkable, he would be remarkable as a sinner, and would dare transgressions beyond the courage of the fashionable libertines whom he wished to despise. (Russell 2009: 677)

We would humbly beg to disagree: Russell is most probably right to emphasize the importance of Byron's Calvinism: the conviction that he is damned is obviously his key motivation. But what is objectionable is the "must" in "since he *must* be remarkable": the right word is "*will*". The concept of Will is central to Byron's poetic discourse, and so much so that he can be viewed as an unacknowledged precursor of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Russell also remarks that Carlyle opposed Byron to Goethe—famously exclaiming "Close thy Byron, open thy Goethe!"—while Musset accused both Byron and Goethe of having instilled the poison of melancholy into the Gallic soul. Both were wrong, but Carlyle understood Byron, whereas Musset did not. Melancholy is not the right word:

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dans les premières *Méditations* et le commentaire, etc.; Musset, *Confessions d'un enfant du siècle* et *Lettre à Lamartine* (1836); A. Dumas, *Mémoires*, t. IV; G. Sand, *Essai sur le drame fantastique* (1836); études critiques d'A. Pichot, Villemain, Phil. Chasles, etc." (Julleville 1899: 725n).

Werther is the melancholy romantic—Byron is pessimistic, and cynical, but he refuses and despises melancholy. It has often been said, that Byron's *Manfred* was a pale copy, almost a plagiarism, of Goethe's *Faust*: that is a gross mistake. Byron's *Manfred* is a radical *revision* of Goethe's *Faust*. In the second part of Goethe's play, Faust, redeemed by Margaret, does not pay his debt and finally goes to heaven. That is anti-Byronic in the utmost: that Christian ideology, which is also that of Wordsworth and Coleridge, as well as that of Kant and Hegel, is precisely what Byron glorifies himself to refuse. At the end of the play, Manfred refuses the Christian forgiveness offered him by the Abbot, but he also refuses to follow the devil come to fetch him, and forces him to withdraw. Manfred-Byron's *Non serviam* is absolute. His philosophic position is pure Heideggerian *Sein-zum-Tode*: Being-toward-Death. His last words are addressed to the devil, to whom he says: "The hand of death is on me — but not yours!" (Byron 1817: 75). And shortly before that he declared: "The mind which is immortal makes itself / Requital for its good or evil thoughts—/Is its own origin of ill and end— / And its own place and time." (74) It should be underlined that Byron's idea of the *mind* is radically individualistic: it is different from the collective, nationalistic, Hegelian concept of *Geist*. Byron upholds an idea of the individual mind, that he pits against fatality in a fearless, self-assertive gamble, and that he erects as the sole judge of his own actions, already beyond good and evil. Russell, by another biased short cut, goes on to say:

> Bismarck effected a synthesis [between the vision of Napoleon as liberator and that of Napoleon as Antichrist]: Napoleon remained Antichrist, but an Antichrist to be imitated, not merely to be abhorred. Nietzsche, who accepted the compromise, remarked with ghoulish joy that the classical age of war is coming, and that we owe this boon not to the French Revolution, but to Napoleon. And in this way nationalism, Satanism, and hero-worship, the legacy of Byron, became part of the complex soul of Germany (Russell 2009: 680).

Here again, we must beg to disagree with what sounds like a misrepresentation of Byron. Hero-worship is the legacy of Carlyle, who is poles apart from Byron. True, the adolescent Byron at Harrow had a statuette of Napoleon on an altar, his "little pagoda", as he called it, but he burned that idol when Buonaparte became a tyrant in his turn. To portray Byron as a promoter of nationalism, perhaps because he fought for the independence of Italy and Greece, simply does not hold water: it is about as clear-sighted and exact as to represent Garibaldi as a precursor of Mussolini, on the ground that both were Italian nationalists. Byron's literary heroes are all flamboyant outcasts, radical exiles, in rebellion against established authority: Conrad the Corsair fights against tyrannical Seyd the slaveholder, The Giaour is a non-Muslim rebel in a Muslim country, Marino Faliero rebels against the Venetian Republic and fails, etc. And Cain is Byron's arch-rebel, the condemned hero of a play where religion itself, the impulse to make sacrifices to God, appears as the source of evil on earth. As for Satanism, if this means rebellion against the unjust tyranny of God, the idea of God, and religion viewed as the main obstacle to human freedom, well yes, then Byron is on the side of Satan, and with a vengeance. But the idea of Antichrist simply does not really make sense in Byron's vision of the world, which is no longer Christian: Byron is an atheist in all but name.

The misunderstanding probably lies in an intellectual tendency of the Modernists to construct a caricatural simplification of Romanticism, the better to define themselves a contrario against it. To a large extent, it is a Byronic attitude. The case is what Jerome McGann, in "Rethinking Romanticism", calls "Byron's resistance to theory":

> Observed through a theory of romanticism like Wellek's, Byron appears either as a problem or an irrelevance. (…) "Imagination" is explicitly *not* Byron's view of the sources of poetry, "nature" is hardly his "view of the world" (Byron is distinctly a cosmopolitan writer), and his style is predominantly rhetorical and conversational rather than symbolic or mythic (McGann 1992: 737).

The study of Byron is central to McGann's enterprise, culminating in *The Romantic Ideology*, to revise the paradigm that has long defined Romanticism in literary studies. The misconception consists in confusing Byronism, which is a form of heroism, with hero worship. Byronism is not an idealism; Byron's concept of the self is *not* transcendental, but quite the contrary. Lamartine had understood this, who in *Le dernier chant du pèlerinage d'Harold* has Harold say:

> Vous savez qui j'étais ! mais qui suis-je aujourd'hui ?
> Ce que j'étais alors: un mystère, un problème:
> Un rêve douloureux qui change sans finir,

> Un débris du passé qui souffle l'avenir,
> Un flot, comme ces flots, errant à l'aventure (Lamartine 1878: 245).

The key to a reassessment of Byron and his crucial importance in the history of literary ideas is the concept of romantic irony, such as it is represented by Anne Mellor, revisiting Schlegel's notion:

> Romantic irony, then, is a mode of consciousness or way of thinking about the world that finds a corresponding literary mode. The artist who perceives the universe as an infinitely abundant chaos; who sees his own consciousness as simultaneously limited and involved in a process of growth or becoming; who therefore enthusiastically engages in the difficult but exhilarating balancing between self-creation and self-destruction; and who then articulates this experience in a form that simultaneously creates and de-creates itself is producing the literary mode that Schlegel called romantic irony. As a literary mode, romantic irony characteristically includes certain elements: a conception of the universe as becoming, as an infinitely abundant chaos: a literary structure that reflects both this chaos or process of becoming and the systems that men impose upon it; and a language that draws attention to its own limitations. (Mellor 1980: 24-25).

Byronism can be defined as a libertarian literary mode of romantic irony thus defined. Byron's most obvious poetic precursor is Voltaire. "Plus mes compatriotes chercheront la vérité, plus ils aimeront leur liberté" (Voltaire 1792: 403): Byron would probably have agreed, except that his idea of enlightenment is not principally on the side of knowledge: When Adam regrets that God ever planted the tree of knowledge, Cain replies to him: "And wherefore pluck'st thou not the tree of life?" (Byron 1822: 10). Byronism is first and foremost a vitalism. Byron never built a system, a cosmology, or a mythology, but he invented a form of writing that operates as a living myth, where the lived experience lends life to ideas: "c'est le concret vécu qui, s'infiltrant dans l'idée abstraite ou générale, la rend *vivante*" (Morin 1986: 168). His great invention is that of a poetic self, and therefore a poetic discourse, that constantly creates and de-creates itself, as it were organically. It is a formula, if not of immortality, at least of literary survival and periodic resurrection, Byronism thus defined has had many successful resurgences to this day. One example that is scarcely remembered is the case of W. H. Auden and the British poets of the 1930s, whose "poetic journalism" and conversational "poésie de départ" is explicitly inspired by Byron's *Don Juan*. Auden clearly explains this in his "Letter to Lord Byron" (in *Letters from* Iceland, 1937):

> I want a form that's large enough to swim in,
> And talk on any subject that I choose,
> From natural scenery to men and women,
> Myself, the arts, the European news:
> And since she's on holiday, my Muse
> Is out to please, find everything delightful
> And only now and then be mildly spiteful (Auden 2002: 42).

Conversational, gossipy, brilliantly superficial, unashamedly self-contradictory, adopting and discarding as many masks as he fancies, Byron had a trendiness that exposed his texts to be as ephemeral and perishable as gazette articles, but as the genius of Protean literary chat he is still here to stay.

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